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Bwiti

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Bwiti is a West Central African religion practiced by the forest-dwelling Babongo and Mitsogo people of Gabon (where it is one of the three official religions) and the Fang people of Gabon and Cameroon. Modern Bwiti is syncretistic, incorporating animism, ancestor worship and Christianity into its belief system. Bwiti use the hallucinogenic rootbark of the *Tabernanthe iboga* plant, specially cultivated for the religion, to induce a spiritual enlightenment, stabilize community and family structure, meet religious requirements and to solve problems of a spiritual and/or medical nature. The root bark has been used for hundreds of years as part of a Bwiti coming of age ceremony and other initiation rites and acts of healing, producing complex visions and insights anticipated to be valuable to the initiate and the chapel. The root bark or its extract are taken in doses high enough to cause vomiting and ataxia as common side effects.

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Liturgy

Intoxicants in Liturgy

As well as influencing religious belief across Gabon, Iboga is also of increasing interest to Western medicine. The active ingredient of the root, **ibogaine**, has been studied scientifically. Ibogaine has been used to treat heroin addicts, alcoholics and people who have been traumatized in childhood. Advocates say its particularly powerful effects allow those who take it to move on from their previous lives and habits.

Taking Iboga brings both open and closed-eye visual hallucinations which can be made stronger by darkness, ambiance and suggestion. Following the hallucinations, users experience an introspective mindset in which they often recount past experiences in life. Difficulty sleeping, nausea and vomiting sometimes last until the day after consumption.^[1]

The Babongo people use Iboga as a stimulant before hunting and during initiation ceremonies. They believe that Iboga frees your soul to leave your body and go on a great journey, to speak with the

spirits of animals and plants.

Rites

Bwiti ceremonies are led by a (male or female) spiritual leader called *N'ganga* who is a very important member of the community and has extensive knowledge of traditional healing practices, hexes and spells. The crucial rite of Bwiti is the initiation ceremony, when young Gabonese men take iboga for the first time in the men's hut to become members of the religion. There are many ceremonies at different times of the year to give homage to the ancestors. Special ceremonies may be held to heal sick persons or drive out harmful spirits. While early forms of Bwiti excluded women, modern chapels include men and women.

During many ceremonies, a traditional torch made of bark and tree sap is burned. Musicians playing drums and a traditional Ngombi harp are central to the rites. The N'ganga and other participants usually dress in red, black and white cloth. They may wear skirts of raffia material and small shells or beads. Animal skins, such as civet cat fur, are often worn. The iboga root may be made into a tea or more often taken in the form of scrapings. Ceremonies usually begin at night and may last for days as the doses of the drug used in these ceremonies is particularly long lasting.

The three-day Bwiti initiation is used for spiritual development. The Iboga is supposed to allow seeing of the true self and visitation of the consequences of past actions. The initiate eats the root of the Iboga tree over a period of hours, watched over by his Bwiti father.

After 24 hours, a typical Bwiti village ceremony may have the initiate taken to the river and lifted into a construction of twigs shaped like a vulva suspended over the water, then washed with water soaked with leaves. Men pull a sapling of the sacred matombi tree from the forest, and plant it outside the Bwiti temple - it represents the initiate as a child. Throughout the day the elders feed him small pieces of Iboga, and the whole village perform, dancing in vivid costumes, in a way designed to bring on further hallucinations.

In the last phase, the initiate is called upon to see the Bwiti visions. Fire dancers sprint the length of the village to entice the Macoi spirits from the darkness of the forest. The initiate must tell the elders what he has seen; this is sacred knowledge, known only to them, and through it he becomes a man. The villagers meanwhile plant a forest around the matombi tree, to represent the problems to be faced in adult life. Together, the men break up the trees branch by branch to symbolize the removal of all his problems.^[2]

Recognition

Bwiti, influenced in ways by Christianity, has become one of Gabon's official religions - there are Bwiti churches, ceremonies and initiations in the capital, Libreville, and the first President was an initiate. In the city, the Bwiti drug Iboga is taken almost as Catholics take the host at Mass, and festivals follow the Christian calendar. Some Bwiti scholars believe Iboga is the Tree of Knowledge from the Garden of Eden.

Additional Information

A notable English language source of information on the religion is James W. Fernandez's book,

"Bwiti: An Ethnography of the Religious Imagination in Africa".^[3] An excellent review article is that of Goutarel, Gollnhofer and Sillans, *Pharmacodynamics and Therapeutic Applications of Iboga and Ibogaine*.^[4]

References

- [^] http://www.erowid.org/chemicals/ibogaine/ibogaine_basics.shtml
- [^] The Babongo (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/tribe/tribes/babongo/index.shtml>) , BBC page for Bruce Parry's "Tribe" series.
- [^] Bwiti: An Ethnography of the Religious Imagination in Africa (<http://ibogaine.desk.nl/fernandez.html>) , Princeton University Press, 1982.
- [^] Robert Goutarel, Otto Gollnhofer and Roger Sillans, *Pharmacodynamics and Therapeutic Applications of Iboga and Ibogaine* (<http://ibogaine.desk.nl/bwiti1.html>) , Psychedelic Monographs and Essays, 6:70-111, 1993.

General references

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- Pinchbeck, Daniel (2002). "Breaking Open the Head". Broadway Books. Part I pages 9-39.
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External links

- Association for Nature and Culture (ANCE): Ebando (<http://www.f-i-a.org/ebando/en/EN.accueil.htm>) A non-governmental organization facilitating among other things initiation into the bwiti religion.

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